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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001642

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STATE FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: INCREASINGLY HOSTILE RHETORIC WORRIES
LEBANESE ABOUT SYRIAN INTENTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1625

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) Some Lebanese contacts -- including relatively neutral figures like LAF Commander Michel Sleiman -- have connected a number of recent statements by Syrian and pro-Syrian figures to arrive at alarming conclusions. Believing that Lebanon is entering a particularly dangerous period, they worry that Syria is putting in place justification for military action against Lebanon, on the theory that Lebanon poses a hostile security threat to Syria akin to the PKK threat to Turkey. To support their analysis, our contacts point, inter alia, to the sensationalist allegations of U.S. military bases being established for action against Syria. In addition, our contacts argue, the rhetoric by Syrians and pro-Syrian Lebanese against Walid Jumblatt reminds one of the public attacks on Rafiq Hariri that preceded his 2/14/05 assassination. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's speech accusing Israel of being behind the assassinations is seen as foreshadowing a new campaign against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. While we defer to Embassy Damascus for insights on what the Syrians are really thinking, Syrian and pro-Syrian figures seem at a minimum to be establishing red lines against any possibility that Fouad Siniora would return as Prime Minister. But we wonder whether more ominous steps are being planned, perhaps with the idea of taking strong counter measures should a March 14 president be elected. End summary.

LINKING TOGETHER DIFFERENT EVENTS
TO DISCOVER AN OMINOUS PATTERN

12. (S) In recent days, several of our regular March 14 and GOL contacts (including Marwan Hamadeh, Charles Rizk, Mohamad Chatah, Boutros Harb, Amine Gemayel, and Ghassan Tueni) have raised with us a number of ominous recent events which they believe are connected. To our surprise, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman -- not a March 14 supporter and often suspected of being overly friendly to Damascus -- shared similar analysis with the Ambassador during a lengthy one-on-one dinner on

10/18. What worries our contacts (none of whom are as quickly seduced by the allure of conspiracy theories as some Lebanese are) includes the following developments:

-- Orchestrated media campaign alleging that the USG is establishing a U.S. military base (or bases) in Lebanon to conduct forward operations against Syria and to counter the Russian military presence in Syria: While this conspiracy theory is not new, the pro-Syrian media in Lebanon took this to extremes with much more specific, carefully crafted, persuasive-sounding fabrications starting on 10/18. Under Secretary of Defense Edelman's visit (ref A) provided the

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"proof" that the Siniora cabinet was secretly negotiating base agreements from which to attack Syria. The increased levels of U.S. military and police assistance are described as the prices we are paying for a direct U.S. military presence in Lebanon.

-- Comments made by Syrian President Bashar al-Asad during his official visit to Turkey: The pro-Syrian media in Lebanon gave suspiciously exaggerated prominence to Bashar's support of Turkey's "right" to do whatever is needed to eliminate the PKK threat originating from bases in northern Iraq. Editorials in the pro-Syrian newspapers emphasized that any country has the right to cross its borders to eliminate a security threat directed against it. (The pro-Syrian newspapers, of course, raised the PKK threat to Turkey in this context, not Hizballah's threat to Israel.)

-- Hassan Nasrallah's 10/5 "Jerusalem Day" speech: In this Ramadan rabble-rousing speech, Nasrallah, citing "facts," said that Israel, in alliance with the United States, was behind all of the assassinations and bombings that have plagued Lebanon over the past three years. Israel's motive, according to Nasrallah, was to destabilize Syria by making sure that Syria would be blamed for the murders. As

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subsequent comments by other Hizballah officials have underscored, Siniora's cabinet is participating in this anti-Syrian campaign by its emphasis on the Special Tribunal that is designed solely as a tool to harm Syria.

-- The Syrian response to the UN regarding PM Siniora's earlier letter: Written as an ostensible response to an earlier letter by Fouad Siniora, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim's 10/19 letter to the UN was leaked immediately to the pro-Syrian media in Lebanon, which gave prominence to the many suggestions that the Siniora cabinet, in cahoots with a "foreign superpower," is hostile to Syria. While Syria is willing to establish friendly relations with Lebanon, the letter notes that it can do so only once there is no longer an enemy cabinet in place in Beirut.

-- The heightened rhetoric against Walid Jumblatt: While pro-Syrian attacks on Jumblatt are nothing new, in the past few days there have been accusations that Jumblatt is meeting with Israelis, Syrian dissidents, and American officials to plot military action against Syria. According to the pro-Syrian media, Jumblatt is reportedly negotiating for Syrian dissidents to live in Beirut to conspire with him how to attack the Syrian regime. (Jumblatt's own violent statements against Damascus, of course, make the anti-Jumblatt reports that much more credible.)

SINIORA CABINET BEING SET UP
AS HOSTILE THREAT TO DAMASCUS

13. (S) Our contacts argue that there is a consistent, coordinated pattern here: that Lebanon -- or, more specifically, the Siniora cabinet and March 14 -- poses a direct security menace to Damascus. Urging the Ambassador to remember carefully what Bashar said in Turkey, LAF Commander

Sleiman, in fact, kept returning to this idea during the three-hour-plus dinner. Syria, he insisted, is carefully establishing the case that it is threatened from Lebanon and that countries have a right to defend themselves from cross-border hostilities. March 14 contacts like Hamadeh and Gemayel argued that Syria will find an excuse or even provoke an incident to permit the Syrian military to strike Lebanon or to excuse any action taken by pro-Syrian forces like Hizballah inside Lebanon. While Syria would face international condemnation for doing so or allowing its proxies to act, the international community would not, in fact, take any meaningful steps to counter Syria's intervention.

14. (S) Moreover, Hamadeh said, "once we are dead," Syria would have the upper hand in Lebanon in any case. On the subject of death, Hamadeh, Tueni and Chatah all expressed deep worry that the escalated rhetoric against Walid Jumblatt is quite similar to the public attacks on Rafiq Hariri's in the month prior to Hariri's 2/14/05 assassination.

WORRYING ABOUT FUTURE SUPPORT
FOR SPECIAL TRIBUNAL FOR LEBANON

15. (S) Speaking with the Ambassador on 10/19, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk expressed concern that, after having suffered a defeat when the UNSC established the Special Tribunal under Chapter VII, the March 8 crowd is also establishing the foundation to make cooperation with the tribunal appear to be a treasonous act. As long as the Siniora cabinet is in place, GOL support for the tribunal is solid. But he worries that a new president, new prime minister, and new cabinet might face an enormous Hizballah-provoked political backlash against the Special Tribunal, on the basis of Hizballah's arguments that the Tribunal (as well the assassinations that provoked it) is an Israeli-U.S. conspiracy against Syria.

COMMENT

16. (S) We defer to Embassy Damascus as to the Syrian thinking and whether, in fact, the ominous pattern identified by our worried contacts exists in reality. To the extent

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that Syria and its Lebanese allies are indeed building a case that the Siniora cabinet poses a threat to Damascus that must be countered, we would question whether Syria would really risk the international condemnation and domestic Lebanese backlash (which could result in a revival of March 14 popularity) against direct Syrian military intervention here.

As we in Embassy Beirut are on more solid ground in speaking of the attitudes of Syria's allies here rather than of Syria itself, it seems to us more likely that the pro-Syrian Lebanese are constructing a tool that they can usefully apply to a number of problems that bedevil them today.

17. (S) First, the pro-Syrians do not want Fouad Siniora to return as PM. By painting him as irredeemably hostile to Syria, they will appeal to all of the Europeans and even Arabs who subscribe to the ideal of friendly fraternal relations between Lebanon and Syria (and who, perversely, seem to see Lebanon more at fault than Syria for the sorry state of relations today). After all, the trembling Europeans eagerly embraced with great relief the idea of a "consensus" president at the first hint of instability by the pro-Syrians, so they will probably be equally ready to jettison Siniora, despite his proven record of achievement, if asked to do so by gun-toting, Iranian-funded, Syrian-backed Hizballah forces who just happen to be operating next to European UNIFIL troop contingents.

18. (S) Second, the pro-Syrians may indeed be planning street action against a March 14 "absolute majority"

president. To add to their constitutional justifications ("preventing a March 14 coup d'etat") for reverting to violence, the pro-Syrians will note the imperative to promote peaceful, friendly relations with Damascus, which they will say is not possible under a March 14 president and March 14-dominated government. Third, the pro-Syrians may know of or suspect further assassinations of March 14 figures. The pro-Syrians will explain these assassinations by citing Nasrallah's prediction in his Jerusalem Day speech that Israel would murder more Lebanese politicians. Fourth, we suspect that Rizk is correct in arguing that we will witness increasing agitation against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The purpose may be to make it difficult for any new cabinet to cooperate with the Tribunal or, if a pro-Syrian cabinet comes into office, to explain why the GOL so swiftly abandons its Tribunal cooperation.

19. (S) Given the risks to our policy in Lebanon, we recommend taking seriously the possibility that the ominous pattern that our contacts perceive really does exist. Particularly after last week's prisoner-and-corpse exchange in which it was treated by Israel, the UN, and the ICRC as equivalent to a state while Siniora's cabinet remained clueless, Hizballah is certainly acting emboldened. Emboldened Hizballah is a more dangerous Hizballah: in 2006, when Hizballah felt emboldened through the National Dialogue, Hizballah decided to kidnap and murder Israeli soldiers, igniting war. Unless the UNSCR 1559 and 1701 reports are more hard-hitting than we expect to be the case, we see nothing tangible on the international horizon in the coming weeks that would force Hizballah or its Syrian and Iranian backers to think twice before taking destructive steps in Lebanon. Preventive action, we believe, needs to take place via the international community outside Lebanon, so that those who back Hizballah and the other pro-Syrians inside Lebanon see clearly what the cost will be to them of any physical attack on Lebanon, the GOL, or March 14.
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